Am I in the right class? Social class and its effect on the educational experience
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When discussing social class, or socio-economic status, confusion can often arise from the range of systems at work. The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), comprising 8 class categories based on employment, became the officially adopted system in 2001 (Office for National Statistics), but as research conducted before this time made use of more ‘blunt’ definitions, data is often too scarce to establish precisely how the groups studied would fit into the new classifications. For example, persons such as students are merely ‘unclassified’, and yet it is possible for a student to be considered middle class or working class among his / her peers, teachers and community. Eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) can be another useful way to gauge socio-economic levels, but we must also note ‘receipt of FSM is really an indicator of family poverty not a measure of social class in the sense that the term is usually understood’ (Gillborn and Mirza 2000,18). As this essay makes use of research and statistics gathered in the context of a variety of systems, the terminology initially used in these studies will be adopted. The major comparisons will be made between middle class and lower, or working, class as this is the dominant comparison in much of the literature, and because as historical data makes use of less defined systems of classification the author is unable to translate groups studied into the new classifications as the data required is not available.

Although increasingly considered as one of the least influential factors relating to social class and attainment, material wealth is a relevant consideration in as much as it is instrumental in the communication of cultural capital, something that will be discussed later in this essay, and especially while government studies are concerned with the economic return of investments in education. In their ‘Educational Inequality’ paper Gillborn and Mirza state: ‘If any individual is denied the opportunity to fulfil their potential … society as a whole bears a social and economic cost’ (2000, 6). We can consider what investment members of different classes are able to make. Stephen J. Ball describes a framework where the education of a child is much less dependent on the pupil’s abilities and work than it is on the parents; not only what they want, but how wealthy they are. Less regulation and more autonomy for schools will ‘… enhance the opportunities for the use of family resources at various key points’ (2003, 22). Material wealth is important in the
home too, and here the lower classes can suffer. In The Home and the School (1964), it is observed that unsatisfactory housing conditions led to pupils of all classes scoring poorly in the 11+ tests, but where middle class pupils remedied this as they grew, manual working class children fell behind even more, and it was said of these children: ‘overcrowding and other deficiencies at home have a progressive and depressive influence on their test performance’ (Douglas 1964, 38).

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) reported that ‘white British’ boys and girls entitled to free school meals (FSM) were the groups with the lowest attainment (Mongon and Chapman 2008, 4), FSM being useful in indicating family poverty, as raw data are routinely available. The Labour government has undertaken a large scale programme of tax credits and employment schemes in an effort to reduce the poverty factor. Alongside this, rather than relying solely on the effects of higher incomes, focus has been on the direct experiences of low income children (Waldfogel and Washbrook 2010, 3). It appears that money alone will not solve the problem of differential achievement between classes, and it is therefore important to consider other influential factors.

There are not only economic, but cultural differences between the classes. A pupil’s cultural background can be a major influencer of academic attitudes and attainment and it has been argued that cultural and geographical issues are more influential than material deprivation, although geographical issues can, however, contribute to material deprivation, as recognised by Chazan who suggests:

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\text{Schools in social priority areas may face considerable problems in maintaining desirable standards of discipline, and outside school the peer culture in disadvantaged areas may encourage anti social attitudes (2000, 94).}
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When a geographical area is populated predominantly by one social group, such as working class families concentrated in areas with the most inexpensive housing or council accommodation, it is easy to understand how an individual is immersed in the culture of that group. Peers are
influential for any pupil, and if the dominant culture is anti school, some strength of will is necessary to remain unaffected.

Geographical factors may also go some way to explain middle class advantage. It is commonly accepted children respond with school success when parents are active and interested, and suffer academically when they are not. Douglas (1964) observed, however, that many children were hard working and studious despite a lack of encouragement at home and hypothesised that middle class children were influenced less by their parent’s attitudes than those of the working classes, saying:

This may reflect the high educational aspirations of the neighbouring middle class families from which they draw their friends or the relatively high academic level of the primary schools they attend (61).

It could be asked, why is it that working class children seem to lack the influence of the aspirations of those around them? It is likely that they do not; rather the aspirations are of a different kind:

for some parents of failing children … it is very difficult to push their child and distressing to hear that the child may be finding school work very ‘hard’ … the parents want to … preserve their childhood as a time of happiness and freedom from worry and expectation (Lucey and Walkerdine 2000, 44).

Where the middles classes have the confidence for academic aspirations based on their successes historically, the working classes prioritise the happiness of their children, possibly motivated by less successful educational experiences in the past, as can be seen in examples such as this quotation from one working class mother:

I don’t think … doing all these qualifications is actually the be all and end all of everything … at the end of the day it’s what makes you happy (Lucey and Walkerdine 2000, 46).
This is only one part of the story; exploration is needed to further understand the class divide.

In discussions of social class the influence of cultural capital on educational experience cannot be ignored. Where economic capital consists of the material wealth transferable between individuals or groups, cultural capital is the collective intellectual wealth. It is still bound together with its economic counterpart though, as those with the means to facilitate learning with their environments and resources (objective capital, such as pictures, books, instruments, machines etc.) ensure more cultural capital for group members in the embodied state, or the ‘long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’ and the cultural reproduction that maintains their means (Bourdieu 1997, 47). Bourdieu explained that the acquisition process of cultural capital for an individual can only be prolonged dependent on how much time their family can provide them to be free from economic necessity (1997, 49-50). Thus capital becomes part of a formula where the cultural and intellectual development is proportional to economic status.

The transformation of economic capital into cultural capital presupposes an expenditure of time that is made possible by the possession of economic capital (Bourdieu 199, 54).

Therefore we see that economic capital is important not only to provide money and resources to give knowledge to a student, but also to provide the freedom of time to assimilate this knowledge, thus making it cultural capital for the individual and the social sphere he inhabits. Working class families may possess cultural wealth, but lack the time to invest it. Bourdieu expands this by saying economic goods can be easily transferred, but are not the ‘precondition for specific appropriation’; in order to consume them, one ‘must have access to embodied cultural capital, either in person or by proxy’ (1997, 50). The actual educational ‘goods’ can be provided by the schools, but the pupil must either personally, or in their network, have access to the means to appropriate these goods.

Schools value the types of knowledge the middle classes can access and in this way they are considered to be sites of cultural reproduction. This is reflected in the literature on class, where
the middle class often represents a standard, a target, against which others are measured. A 2010 report for the Sutton Trust gave justification for this:

We use the experiences and development of middle income children as a benchmark, as this seems an appropriate target population against which to consider the lowest income families (Waldfogel and Washbrook 2010, 7)

It is important to note that the working classes too value certain types of knowledge, although the types of knowledge valued by curriculum and the culture will often differ.

Bourdieu’s concept sheds some light on the inequalities in education and their reproduction, but can say less about where they originated. Perhaps Basil Bernstein’s work on language codes can illuminate us further. He outlines two codes of language, elaborated and restricted, and states that:

status groups may be distinguished by their forms of speech. Difference is most marked where the gap between socio-economic levels is very great … different emphases are placed on language potential (Bernstein 1971:61).

The working classes, through economic necessity, are likely to adopt language to direct how to perform immediately necessary tasks, whereas the middle classes, economically permitted the luxury of time, may be able to focus on explanation and justification of their directions. Time regulates the learning of the codes themselves, as the abbreviated code of the working classes is readily learned and habituated, and all people have access to it, whereas the elaborated code requires longer periods of learning, formally and informally, and not all have access (Bernstein 1971, 79). Of course, a note on geographical factors is warranted here, as when located among peers and culture already adopting elaborate code, pupils have access to a much wider vocabulary than those that are immersed in population where the restricted code is dominant. In this way certain language code use is perpetuated in the particular areas where it is already common.
While schools reward the elaborate code and the restricted code is devalued, the lower classes can be excluded from engaging in education fully. Bernstein holds this is not for want of intelligence however, as forms of ‘language-use progressively orient the speakers to distinct and different types of relationships to objects and persons, irrespective of the level of measured intelligence’ (1971, 61). Culture, rather than intelligence, is instrumental in academic differentiation.

Either the mode of expression of intelligence is a cultural function or the lower working class are genetically deficient in … exploitation of complex verbal relationships. The latter seems improbable when you consider that the linguistic environment of the working class is one of relative depravation … The mode of expression of intelligence may well be a matter of learning (Bernstein, 1971:66).

These codes affect communication between teacher and pupil. Restricted code tends not to be prepared to suit particular contexts, and relies more on how, rather than what, things are said, the listener’s intent then being taken for granted. Meaning is more explicit in elaborated language, and it is modified to suit the listener, and so meaning is not taken for granted (Bernstein 1971, 78).

As damaging assumptions about a listener’s condition can arise, so too may the listener make harmful assumptions about the speaker, such as in the form of teacher assumptions about the pupil. Roy Nash highlights the need to investigate such aspects of the learning environment as well economic factors.

The lower a child’s parent’s social class the poorer the child’s attainments … Unfortunately, because it totally ignores learning processes … this research cannot explain the causal relationship reflected by the correlations (Nash 1973, 2)

Teachers may develop negative perceptions of pupils and children are not blind to the effects of these perceptions. One pupil, quoted in a report by Theo Cox, criticises the favouritism of teachers:
If you are the type that has 100 for this and 100 for that they love you. They say it’s a pleasure to teach you. They don’t think about the girl in the back years who wants to learn but got a problem and can’t (Cox 2000, 148).

Already it is apparent that assumptions, based on class or performance, have an effect upon students. The reciprocal relationship between teacher perceptions and pupil reactions to them can be problematic, perpetuating an unproductive situation. Nash demonstrated this through the example of a pupil he named ‘Ian’, who knew he was not thought of highly by his teachers and was poor at school work.

His identity in the classroom has been managed by his teachers and has been transmitted by them to the class and to Ian himself … He certainly felt picked on … he seems to be resisting the teachers’ power to control his identity. Unfortunately, this resistance is seen by the teachers as ‘sullenness’ and simply serves to reinforce their perceptions (Nash 1973, 74).

Unfair differentiation has been demonstrated as detrimental.

When based on legitimate criteria, some categorisation of students can benefit them. When streamed into ability groups, for example, below average ability students can maintain a good self image when still able to come top, or perform well, in the respective classes (Barker Lunn 1970, 134). The danger lies in teachers discriminating on the basis of their own perceptions of class and background, circumstances that should ideally be incidental rather than influential. Of course there are many that do not and perhaps when dealing with working class students in particular, the schools and their teachers, widely regarded as middle class institutions, benefit from more contextual intelligence. Returning to the NCSL report of 2008, when investigating successful leaders in predominantly working class schools, it was found that they ‘show a profound respect for the context they are working in … Most of them have backgrounds and childhoods in low income communities … an important part of their professional and personal identity’ (8). Teachers, as well as pupils, construct identity from their social background. Those
observed in the NCSL report had an understanding of the class and cultures they were facilitating, and were able to adopt a suitably sensitive, and successful, approach. As a final note on perceptions it is useful to consider something more from Nash on untested assumptions increasingly hard to accept. Teacher behaviour must be constant in order to effectively measure the effect of social class on achievement.

It is no use saying that children from low social class backgrounds do poorly … until it is known that teachers behave to them in the same way that they behave to children from higher social backgrounds (Nash 1973:88).

Resistance from pupils, as a reaction to teacher perceptions, has already been noted, and it is interesting to discuss this resistance, particularly from working class children, further. As Lucey and Walkerdine observe:

Policy makers … fail to see the transformation of identity that maintaining high school performance requires for most working class children …[and] understand … ambivalence and ‘resistance’… as defences against the prospect of such difference (2000, 43).

A striking point is made here that performing well is not compatible with working class identity, and resistance occurs in the difficult process of changing that identity. Perhaps in some way attributable to the immediate economic necessities in the working classes, and the restricted language used to communicate them, their identity is often bound up in the value of manual work, in ‘honest labour’ over academic prowess. Lucey and Walkerdine note that ‘the masculinity of working class boys … [is] rejecting of the feminine culture of school in general and literacy in particular’ (2000:40), and go on to point out that:

Successful progression through the examination system … was certainly not a feature of the families of the working class children … nor indeed of the wider community of which they were a part (42).
Happily, in the same chapter, they attempt to dispel the possible, derogatory, misconception that the working classes are opposed to academia, stating that the antireading and antischool position is not resistance … but a defence against fear. They act against study for the fear of the loss of masculinity … already under serious threat in terms of the disappearance of the jobs which required it. Paradoxically however, the willingness and ability to study is the very thing they need for jobs (49).

This resistance, or fear, becomes then a possible influencer of teachers’ perceptions, another way that the negative educational experiences of the working classes serve to perpetuate similar experiences in the future.

Theo Cox surmised from his investigations that contrary to some evidence, the attitudes of socially disadvantaged children in Britain were effectively no poorer than those of more advantaged children, and therefore we can certainly hope to help raise their motivation to learn if only the right measures are put in place (Cox 2000, 151). Clearly, significant action was taken early on to tackle material disadvantage. The introduction of free elementary education in 1870, and of free secondary schooling in the 1944 Education Act, were great steps towards inclusion. The Education Reform Act (1998) also rang in many changes. The National Curriculum ensured that pupils in state schools had access to the same education, regardless of which institution their economic or geographical status led them to attend. However, as parents were also allowed to specify a preference for particular schools, any inequalities that remained between schools could possibly still be perpetuated. The act also advised provision for community schooling, positive for inclusion, providing activities that the lower classes may otherwise have had to opt out of due to economic concerns.

The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project of 2004 stated that ‘the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income’ (1). By the time we see social class having an affect on school experiences it may be too late to address what EPPE considered to be the paramount issue of home learning, and to this end Sure Start centres are provided throughout the country.
These centres were created in the wake of the 1998 green paper ‘Meeting the Childcare Challenge’, which aimed for the provision of affordable childcare for all children from birth to 14 years old, ‘making childcare more accessible by increasing places and improving information’ (DCSF 2009). These policies were further developed with the 2006 Childcare Act, the first act exclusively concerned with early years. Sure Start centres achieve this by bringing together ‘early education, health and family-support services for families … to tackle child poverty and social exclusion … [and] promote the physical, intellectual and social development’ (DCSF, 2010). These strategies help to negate some of the disadvantages associated with lower social class, ensuring the statement ‘Every Child Matters’ rings true, and that all children are given an equally firm footing from which to begin to develop.

Evidently there are many factors that can result in differential achievement related to social class. Such a complicated educational issue cannot be resolved easily, and not without significant changes in government approaches and class perceptions. It is, however, encouraging to see that such developments are taking place. Economic gaps are being reduced through affordable provisions in place right from the start of a child’s life, and even changes in socio-economic classifications demonstrate a shift in perceptions of class and how it is understood. It is promising that the current and hopefully any following government too, show continued commitment to maintaining the current course. Though it may be a long process, and realistically, total social inequality could lie in the distant future, it seems that we are at least making promising steps in the right direction.

References


